Castlemaine Naturalist

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The Long billed Dowitcher photo by Nigel Harland - see article page 2

Eucalypts in Kaweka Wildflower Reserve

Ern Perkins

The poor health of the trees and shrubs in Kaweka has become increasingly noticeable. Many shrubs and trees have died, and others have dead limbs and sparse foliage. I thought it might be a worthwhile activity to record the dead eucalypts, and to monitor changes as they occur.

Over 90 dead eucalypts were counted. Those counted were eucalypts without any live foliage. Trunks rising separately from the ground were counted as separate trees. Many of the live trees are severely stressed. These include trees with 95% or more of the leaves dead, or with only a single small shoot growing from the base. Some multi-trunked trees have a single live trunk. For several trees the amount of green was reduced to the size of a postage stamp.

For each dead tree, the species (when possible), the GPS coordinates, the presence of dead leaves, dead fruit or buds, or bark was recorded; these give an indication of how recently the tree has died. The diameter at eye height was also recorded, and the Kaweka block number. Stumps under a metre high, or trees that had blown over were not recorded. The recently dead trees include mature trees and saplings.

Dead trees include Red Box, Long-leaf Box, Grey Box, Red Stringybark, Yellow Gum and Blue Gum.

Another feature of Kaweka is the almost total absence of very small eucalypts. Elsewhere in the goldfields forests, there are numerous eucalypts under a metre in height, often multi-stemmed, and often with many leaves eaten.

Why is there a problem? Investigations elsewhere suggest that many factors can contribute to tree decline.

1. Many trees in the district have suffered defoliation because of cup moth infestation. Elsewhere, in contrast to Kaweka, many of the trees have recently produced new foliage.

2. Microorganisms play a critical role in water and nutrient uptake by plants. Planting programs have been a feature at Kaweka for many years., which increases the chance that harmful micro-organisms have been introduced to the Kaweka soils.

3. Drought stress is evident in much of the local forest. . Kaweka has a network of paths, some across the slope and others downhill. The paths act as drains, which channel water away from the bushland plants. Many local soils become water repellent when dry, resulting in more run-off to be collected by the paths. As a result the effective rainfall in Kaweka will be less than the nominal rainfall.

Before starting this project it had not occurred to me that bushland pathways could modify water flow, and contribute to tree death. A thing to look for when in the bush!

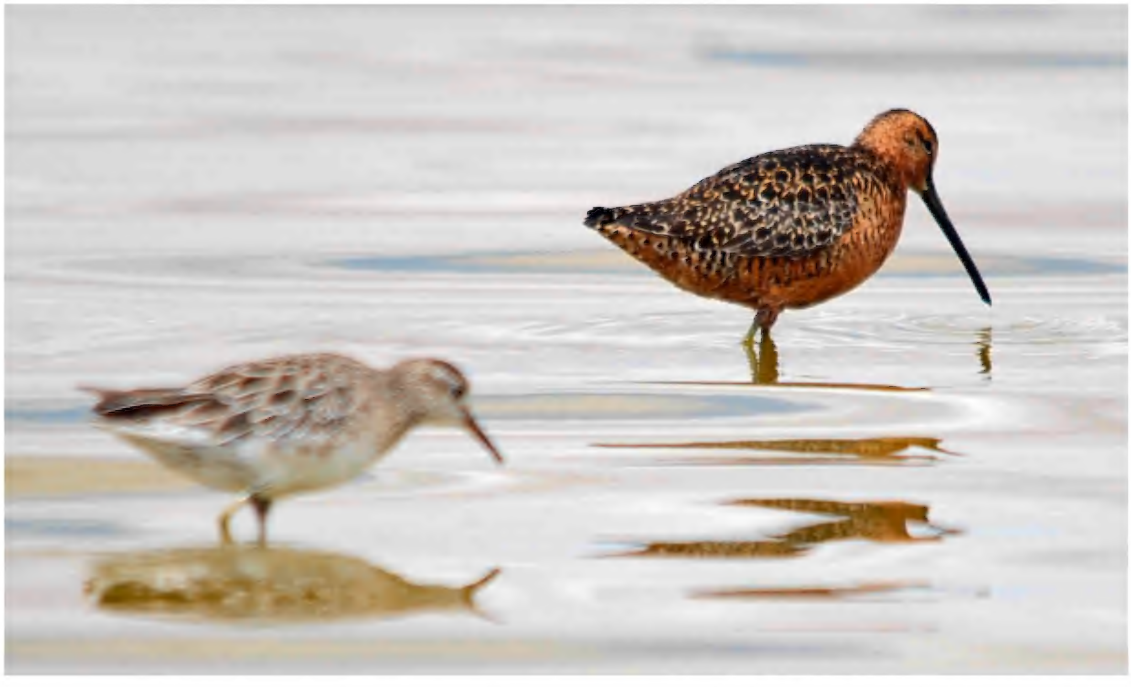
A copy of the records and map are available on request.

Tale of the long-billed Dowitcher

Nigel Harland

Some of you may remember that I stopped “twitching” birds a couple of years ago. This means that I was not going to travel vast distances when a rarity turned up. However, in November last year a rarity turned up on Lake Tuchewop, between Kerang and Swan Hill. I thought about it, the distance from Castlemaine to Swan Hill was not that far, I could do it in a day. I contacted birding friends who live in Albury and Deniliquin to see if they were going and discovered that they couldn’t go until the following Tuesday (today was Friday of the week before). The next problem was that Anne's mother was visiting on Sunday and it seemed unreasonable to go before then. So, I decided to go on Monday morning, but then I realised there was another problem. Anne’s car was going in for a repainting job and would be there for a week. So we only had one car to get Anne to work and me to Swan Hill. I won’t bore you with the details, but we managed to sort that out.

Even though my friends weren’t going until Tuesday, I decided to head off on Monday to try and find the bird myself, then stay overnight in a motel and meet the others on Tuesday morning. I arrived in Kerang mid-afternoon and just drove along the road to Swan Hill expecting to find the lake somewhere on the right hand side. I arrived in Swan Hill without seeing a lake on that side of the road, so stopped at a service station to ask where Lake Tuchewop was, but failed. I drove slowly back and arrived in Kerang. This time I stopped at a Motel and the proprietor was most helpful. He checked his computer and said it was along the road to Swan Hill at a turn off the name of which I can’t remember. It was now around 6pm, but still good light. It is 50km from Kerang to Swan Hill, so I set off and didn’t find the road. The next thing I saw was the 25km sign to Swan Hill. Frustrated, I turned around and



headed back to Kerang to find overnight accommodation and wait for my friends to arrive the following morning. We met up and they said they knew where it was. We set off and reached the 25 km sign I had seen the night before. About 100m further on they turned right! About 500m along that road was the lake with two telescopes set up. We got our gear out of the cars and headed to where they were. They had been there for several hours with no success, so we set up and waited for the bird to arrive. We waited for four or five hours and nothing turned up. It is perhaps twice as big as a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, so it would be quite easy to recognise. Nothing happened, so we all went home. It is a feeling I remember from my twitching days, there are no guarantees, but I still drove home with a heavy heart.

The next day I learned that the bird had returned to the lake, just had a day off somewhere I guess. Similar arrangements with cars, work and twitching were made and I was back on the road to Kerang. This time I knew the way and found a much bigger view of telescopes (is that the correct collective noun?). They were a good 2km distant from the car, so I collected binoculars, telescope and camera and headed off. I met a guy coming back and he assured me it was still there. I found the myriad of telescopes and lo and behold there it was! Waders are usually small and boring, but this was almost twice as big as the other waders there and to make things even easier it was in full breeding plumage. After we had seen it through the scope, some of us crawled along the beach to get some closer photographs. We crept up a few metres at a time to ensure we did not disturb any of the birds – there were hundreds of other waders there too. Once they started looking edgy, we crawled in reverse and back to our scopes. I managed to enlarge some of the photos when I got back home and the ones included with this article are of the Dowitcher itself [cover photo] and one with a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper to contrast the sizes. [above]

The bird has been unofficially confirmed as a Long-billed Dowitcher, which means it is a first for Australia. At the time of writing the bird is still there and another rarity, a Red-necked Phalarope has joined it.

The Owlet-nightjar

Damian Kelly

Not many people have seen the Owlet-nightjar in the wild, but in my experience this beautiful little bird is actually much more common than you think. And interestingly, it is also more active during the day than you might expect for a nocturnal bird. So, next time you are in the bush spend a bit of time looking at likely spots. In my experience these birds can be found in a variety of hollows in many different areas. I have seen them in a range of habitats: Castlemaine in Kalimna, Rise and Shine out past Newstead, Wyperfeld, Horsham, Terrick Terrick north of Bendigo as well as in Melbourne suburbs. You have probably seen nest boxes around the bush, but next time look a bit closer. This cute fellow was a bit sleepy but still kept a careful eye on me. This was mid-afternoon on a sunny day in winter where this bird was soaking up a bit of warmth.

This nestbox was probably intended for Phascogales or Possums, but instead was the home of an Owlet-nightjar (near Horsham).

Camping in Wyperfeld towards evening I heard a mob of honeyeaters making a racket so I went over, expecting to see a Goshawk or similar, but instead was surprised to see an Owlet-nightjar fending off some angry White-plumed honeyeaters.

Walking at the Rise and Shine Reserve near Newstead on a warm summer day I heard the sound of wing beats behind me and suddenly this little fellow landed on a branch right in front of me giving great views.

Hollows of various types are a preferred roosting spot, often near a water source. I have seen these birds in diverse locations ranging from nest boxes to rotten fence posts as well as tree hollows. Next time you are wandering in the bush keep your eyes open - you never know what you might see. At night, have a listen for the call – usually just a single note repeated regularly. More than once this has alerted me to their presence in an area and I have later returned during the day to look for likely hollows. Spotlighting will not show them up, as unlike owls and possums, the eyes of the Owlet-nightjar do not reflect light.

A typical spot in a horizontal branch – Terrick Terrick

Below:
Hard to spot from a distance – snoozing in the afternoon sun – Yarra River, Heidelberg.

This hollow was next to a footbridge frequented by dozens of walkers, but this bird seemed unfazed by people walking by, all of whom had no idea what was there.

Notices

The meeting in March has been moved back to **Friday 6th** in order to avoid a clash with the opening of the Castlemaine Festival.

A **roadside clean-up** is scheduled for Saturday morning February 28th at our usual part of the Pyrenees highway near the Golf course. Meet at the corner of Golf links road at 9 am. Organiser Geoff Harris.

We work sections of the road for about 2 hours. Please note that KABC rules prohibit anyone under 16 from working on the roadside. Wear sturdy footwear and gloves. Garbage bags and reflective vests will be supplied.

CFNC 2015 Speaker list to June

Fri	February 13	AGM Geoff Park
Fri	March 6	Phil Collier
Fri	April 10	Albert & Eleanor Wright : Birds
Fri	May 8	Brett Lane : Shorebirds
Fri	June 12	John Lindner : Flinders Ranges

The SEANA autumn camp

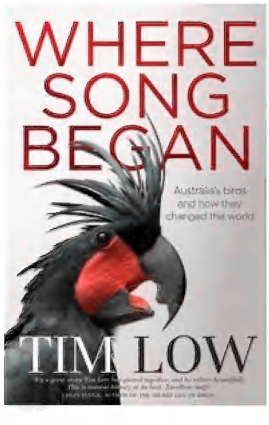
Hosted by FNC Ballarat

will take place Friday 13 to Sunday 15 March 2015

Depending on seasonal conditions, excursions are planned to include geology, mining history, grasslands, bushland, mineral springs, birds, wetlands and whatever else is interesting.

Birds in the context of geological history

Noel Young



My Christmas reading included Tim Low's recent book "where song began". This is a must for anyone interested in Aussie birds and their place in the world. The work draws together genetic and fossil evidence over recent years which has turned around the established thinking that songbirds come from the northern hemisphere and were not well represented here. In fact they originated here. Tim Low explains how adaptation of both birds and vegetation to our increasingly harsh dry climate as the Australian continent has drifted northwards, led to an ecological coupling of profusely flowering trees, and birds which aggressively exploit this unusual food source year round. This is

contrasted with northern hemisphere, where seasonal change is much greater leading to the development of more bird song in spring.

Lots of detail includes the unique or unusual behaviour of our birds, like our love - hate relationship with the over - aggressive Magpie and the intelligence of the Cockatoos. Altogether a fascinating and very readable book.

Observations

At the December meeting -

- Geoff has about 30 Swallows nesting around the house, and has observed Magpies waiting for young Swallows to appear as a tasty treat
- Chris reported seeing White-backed Swallows near Baringhup during a bird count last Sunday
- Richard has seen Hyacinth Orchids and Cinnamon Bells
- Natalie found an Echidna in the veg. plot; had a flock of 70 to 100 Little Ravens visiting over five or six days, and Pink Hyacinth Orchids flowering in Weynton rd. (usually January)
- Geraldine passed around a praying Mantis, and reported an Eastern Shrike-tit at home
- Rosemary had a photo of a Pobblebonk (Banjo frog) and reported Striated Thornbills and Eastern Spinebills at home
- Max heard a Pied Currawong this morning
- Denis Hurley made the following notes: November 15 - Male and female Pacific Black ducks 'calling in' now and then for seed under the feeder tray; December 7 - Ravens harassing Black Cockatoos, and first spotting of Tuans in gums near the house; Dec. 9 - two Tuans on carport rafters; Dec. 10 - two juvenile Long-necked Turtles, and about 15 Black Cockatoos in a Tasmanian Blue Gum at Expedition Pass res.,
- On Expedition Pass reservoir, Denis also reported a "special treat" - "In several seasons of paddling a kayak on the res. I had seen only a male Musk duck, but two weeks ago a female, carefully keeping a young one shielded from me. So spring still works, but I haven't seen the male. I still see a Swamp Harrier at the north end now and then."

January -

- Rita - flock of up to 150 Ravens around for 3 weeks, plus a large flock of Cockatoos and Corellas. Also noted a Magpie eating berries
- Nigel was surprised to discover a Goshawk with a dead Rosella inside a netted pear tree
- Barbara saw 5 Silvereyes at home including two babies
- Geraldine has an Eastern Shrike-tit and White-browed Babblers in the garden

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists
Coming events

Fri February 13 meeting: AGM Speaker GEOFF PARK

Sat February 14 field trip: bird excursion - Cairn Curran

Sat February 28 - Roadside clean-up. See notice page 6

Fri March *6 meeting: Speaker PHIL COLLIER

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - third Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadways; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 6.00 pm. Members are invited to attend.

Club website - http://castlemainefnc.wordpress.com/

Subscriptions for 2014
Ordinary membership: Single $30, Family $40
Pensioner or student: Single $25, Family $30
Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

2014 Committee

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